The Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt Recovery Project

Interview about Sarah Piatt with Dr. Karen L. Kilcup by Dr. Elizabeth Renker
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ER: This is Professor Elizabeth Renker in Columbus, Ohio. It is March 5, 2021, and I have the pleasure today of talking to Karen L. Kilcup. Karen is the Elizabeth Rosenthal Excellence Professor of English, Environmental & Sustainability Studies, and Women's & Gender Studies at UNC Greensboro. She has published numerous volumes and editions and anthologies on topics related to the environment, women's writing, American poetry and poetics, and children's poetry, but that by no means covers her vast record of scholarship as well as her many topics in teaching and writing for a public audience. She's also a past president of the Society for the Study of American Women Writers and she's the editor of *ESQ*: *A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture*. I mentioned a minute ago that she also works on some topics of great public interest, and I wanted to mention that she is now working with graduate students to prepare an online, open-access anthology of nature writing and environmental writing for children called *The Envious Lobster*. And maybe we'll have a chance to talk about that today. But my first question for Karen—who is one of the first-wave Piatt scholars I'm talking to as part of this series of oral histories and written memoirs—and I'd like to ask Karen: Karen, how did you first come to hear of Sarah Piatt?

KK: Well, first Elizabeth, I want to thank you for that gracious introduction and this opportunity to talk about Piatt because, as you know, I'm so fond of her work and really admire her tremendously. I actually write about this, indirectly, in a recent essay for this year's *Concord Saunterer,* which is the journal of the Thoreau Society. And I won't go into how it came to be there, but I remember very vividly my introduction to Piatt, which occurred at the June 1992 Nathaniel Hawthorne Society conference at Concord Academy in Concord, Massachusetts. Paula Bennett had recently started working at Southern Illinois University and I was friends with her colleague, Lee Person, who said to me, "You have to meet my colleague, Paula. I think you guys will get along really well." Well, of course I knew Paula's work. I was entirely daunted by her scholarly reputation. But we hit it off immediately, we found we shared a passion for recovery work. And in the course of our conversation, she told me about Piatt and described some of the poetry. So, following that conversation, when I got home, she sent me some Piatt poems to choose from, because we had talked about the anthology I was working on at the time, *Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers*. And she sent me a group of, a really *generous* group, of Piatt poems from which to choose. And the first poem that I read, I think, was "Giving Back the Flower," which just knocked me over. So modern in sensibility and voice. And among that group my other favorite is, I think, "The Funeral of a Doll," which I hope we can come back to, because I think it's one of Piatt's best poems and it's one that kind of sneaks up on you.

ER: All right, so one of the kinds of stories that I know our listeners are very interested in is this whole phenomenon of how a writer is rediscovered: the stories of how someone is lost and then reclaimed. And as you and I are both aware, these are stories that are being told all over

public culture at the present time, as in the case of the *New York Times* series of obituaries for women they did not cover the first time [that is, at the time of their deaths]. And I'm sure you have a lot of conversations with people you meet, as do I, about, you know, what happened to these women? And I happen to have a lot of conversations in particular about Sarah Piatt. But you have been such a force in scholarship for recovering women's writing more generally—I wonder if you could talk to us a little bit, first of all, about that larger scholarly work that you've done recovering women writers, and then maybe we can move to more of a focus on Sarah and talk about some of those poems you mentioned.

KK: That would be great. And I actually, before we had this conversation, I went back to each of my books that references Piatt in some way, and so I think it would be great to be able to touch upon that more specifically. My recovery work really began, as I think it has begun for so many of us, with my teaching. At the time I was—well, when I first started my academic career, I was teaching some women writers, but of course, you know, like many people, I was trained in the canon. So when I took an American Renaissance course there was not a woman to be found, and that includes Emily Dickinson. I was told that Harriet Beecher Stowe was popular trash. Later on I was told that regionalist writers like Sarah Orne Jewett, Rose Terry Cooke, even Kate Chopin, were simply very limited, regional-wise. So what motivated me to get started in, really in earnest, was preparing at the time mimeographed copies of women's writing to supplement the anthologies that were at the time essentially all male writers. And I spent a whole summer—and this was *long* before we had scanners, long before we had the Internet—I spent a whole summer in the un-airconditioned wing of Yale University, their American wing of their library, and I read every single woman writer that I could find in that wing. [laughs] I want to note that it was 100 degrees that summer, so recovery work was arduous in many ways. I came home after that summer with a tall four-drawer filing cabinet full of photocopies from which to distill an anthology of women writers. But that anthology became the basis for my teaching at the University of Hull and I've used it ever since.

ER: All right, so one of the parts of this whole story that is really riveting, I think, for people who are interested in this topic, and also of tremendous use for other scholars doing this kind of work, is the question about where you find stuff. And you know, we live in an age, as you know from being a teacher, where there are a lot of kind of default assumptions that you just go to Google and everything's there. And, of course, when you're doing this kind of work in primary sources, you know that is by *no* means the case, and the detective hunt part of the work that we do is something that people find very interesting. So your story about going to Yale and working in the 100-degree library, just looking at sources and making copies, that's a really interesting story. And I wonder if we could just unpack that a little. So, those early copies you were making to use in teaching and then, if I understood correctly, they were sources for your Blackwell anthology, right?

KK: Yes.

ER: Just so our listeners know: I have the book right here on my desk—it's called *Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers*: *An Anthology* edited by Karen L. Kilcup, if you'd like to find it. And it is a hefty volume of 500-plus pages. Closer to 600, actually. And this is partly what I

meant earlier when I said that Karen has done a vast amount of groundbreaking work on recovering women writers more generally, and Piatt is one of the writers she has worked on and returned to multiple times. So that's why I wanted to capture both these elements of Karen's research. So when you were looking at those sources, Karen, did you have sort of an order of attack? Like, did you start with anthologies, did you start with newspapers, did you start with literary magazines? How did you think about where to look to find things?

KK: Well, I actually started with single-author volumes, because that was the method that was most readily available, right? So you can just go from A to Z—

ER: Yeah.

KK: —in the American wing. I will say that in doing that work, I was guided partly by suggestions from colleagues. Because, when I knew I was going to put this anthology together, I wrote, and I mean *wrote*—I did not email, I wrote—to colleagues across the country, and in fact in Europe as well, asking for their suggestions. What writers were they teaching and reading and writing about that they really wanted me to look at for inclusion in this anthology? And I'll just give you one really notable example of the generosity of scholars in helping me focus a bit.
Nell Irvin Painter, the distinguished African American historian at Princeton, sent me, actually, a copy of what she took to be the really authentic version of Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I A Woman?" speech and that's how that version came to be in my anthology alongside the more familiar version.

ER: Ah, wow.

KK: So that was that was one really important element in recovery. A second important element was simple serendipity. You cannot have that kind of serendipity when you're looking at online databases, because you can be going along the library shelf and you might find something that you didn't even know about, or that it's not catalogued in the right way. And so many of the things that I came upon were just marvelous surprises.

ER: Wow.

KK: And then, of course, once I sort of narrowed things down and found writers whom I found compelling, I also went to the magazines, which often had much more innovative work than some of the single-author volumes, because publishers wanted to be sure, of course, that they [the single-author volumes] sold.

ER: Now, this is kind of a side note, but our listeners will see that elsewhere in this series of recorded interviews I spoke with the former curator of Rare Books here at The Ohio State University with whom I worked to start our Piatt collections here at Ohio State. And in my years of working with him, I always found that he had a phrase that I loved and I use in my own teaching now, which is getting at the phenomenon where you're working with these old materials, as you were in that American wing at Yale, and because so few people have actually used these books, because they have become forgotten in some sense, a lot of times you find

stuff stuck in there by a reader from 1880 or whatever. And my colleague Geoff Smith always calls this—his phrase is—"junk in books." And I say to my students, it's just like today, like you use some random thing for a bookmark. You know, you're reading your mail, you stick a letter in there, and it's not uncommon to find things tucked in books. And one of my favorite stories on this, which I'll tell: just recently, as I was over in my Rare Books library here preparing a class on archival research methods for my undergrads, and I was using something the library had recently acquired. It was an account book from the early nineteenth century. So just for our listeners, this means this person was a merchant of some kind and was keeping a lot of tabulations about sales and receipts. And people might say, "Oh my gosh. Why would you look at that?" And the answer is, well, because I'm a total nerd and I love this stuff. But I was paging through it and I came to a page where there was—someone's business card was sitting in there. And you're supposed to be very careful with these items because they're fragile. So I very gingerly turned the card over before I turned the page, and on the back was an autograph of Nathaniel Hawthorne. [laughs] Now, if you could all see Karen now, you see what she's doing! [expression of astonishment] So that's a great—and then you know, I was so excited, I thought I would stop breathing! But that's a good example of "junk in books." So do you recall, Karen, when you were looking through all those volumes, did you, were you—and also, of course, marginalia, right?—books that were owned by people—so do you have any stories about "junk in books" from this project of yours?

KK: [laughs] I have too many stories.

ER: Okay.

KK: But I'll just try to stick with two. The first is one of the writers I had determined to look at is the Chinese-Canadian writer, Onoto Watanna [Winnifred Eaton]. That was her pseudonym. Yale had a copy of her novel *A Japanese Nightingale* in *beautiful* condition. Well, I opened it up, and who had signed it? The author!

ER: Oh my gosh.

KK: The Yale librarians got really sick of me bringing materials upstairs and saying, "This needs to be in special collections." So that's one example. Your earlier comments actually also reminded me of another way that I had to approach recovery work, especially when I did my Native American women writers anthology, but more generally when approaching women of color, which was to do research in the archives. Buffalo Bird Woman, I think, was—I got a lot of material from, I want to say, the Minnesota Historical Society, and they were fantastic in helping. But the one I want to point to that I think you will love, was when I was doing the edition of domestic servant Lorenza Stevens Berbineau's European travel diary [*From Beacon Hill to the Crystal Palace: The 1851 Travel Diary of a Working-Class Woman*], where she went on the Grand Tour with her family, the Francis Cabot Lowell II family, and they went to the Great Exposition in London and they went all over Europe. At any rate, she kept these little pocket diaries throughout her trip. And when I went to the Massachusetts Historical Society, I was reading through them and transcribing them carefully. And a lot of them have these little inner compartments, I mean there are, many of them are smaller than a cigarette packet. And

one of them, when they were in France, Switzerland, it was right around that area, I opened it up and inside there were two items that shocked and amazed me. One was a flower, pressed, a pressed flower that she had gathered at the foot of Mont Blanc—

ER: Oh my gosh. Wow.

KK: —and the second was a baby tooth that belonged to the little boy that she was caring for, Eddie Lowell.

ER: Oh, my gosh, that's amazing. That's amazing.

KK: Very close to Eddie and, in fact, he communicated to her while he was on his honeymoon.

ER: Wow. Yeah, that's a great story. Boy. And you know those things, not only do they have this kind of affective power, something you wrote about in your recent book, *Who Killed American Poetry?*, which I hope we'll talk about as well. They have this kind of affective power. But from a much more practical standpoint, sometimes they help you date things. So these are really useful examples I think of this kind of detective work that's involved for a scholar like yourself who's genuinely discovering new things and bringing them to attention. Can you tell us a little bit, just, I want to back up for a minute to a detail of something you said, and then go back to your Blackwell [anthology]. Did I hear correctly that you said that when you were a student Emily Dickinson was not yet being studied as a canonical poet?

KK: Well, I wouldn't say she was not being studied as a canonical poet—

ER: Okay, tell us about that. Yeah.

KK: I had two professors in grad school, one of whom was very much enamored of Emily Dickinson, but Walt Whitman was his true love. We spent a lot more time on Whitman than we did on Dickinson. The other professor, however, who was a well-known Americanist scholar, scholar of the American Renaissance and beyond, we did not read Dickinson.

ER: Okay. One of the reasons I wanted to return to that detail was because Dickinson has come up in some of the other interviews in this series and, as you know, for very good reasons. And in case we have someone listening to this interview right now who hasn't listened to the others, I'll just mention briefly, and then I'd love to hear your take on it, Karen, that when I teach Sarah Piatt, I often also talk about Dickinson, because I find that the two of them make a very useful pair of women poets to talk about. My students have always heard of Emily Dickinson, first of all. And to talk about how early Dickinson achieved canonical status, relative to other women writers, I think is very interesting to them and very useful. As well as to talk about why. And, you know, I would like to hear your thoughts about two topics, Karen. These are big topics, so we'll get to them as we can. One: what would be your assessment, given all the work you've done on women writers—is there any way that we can talk about why it happened for Dickinson before it happened for other women writers? That's one question. Is there some way to explain that to our audiences? I have lost the trail of thought for my second question, but I

will find it again. So let's start with that. Why did Dickinson make it earlier than other women writers?

KK: Well, I think a really important reason was that she had champions very early on and those champions continued to work on her writing, to produce editions of her writing. I'm talking now, of course, about Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd. And you know, Higginson wrote reviews, the two of them wrote really, actually I think quite helpful introductions to Dickinson's poetry, despite the fact that they regularized it in ways that many of us find nauseating. But it helps to have a champion. And I think that they helped perpetuate her relationship [with the public] and just at least keep her in the public [eye] long enough for scholarship to catch up with her. The other thing, as you know, as I talk about in *Who Killed American Poetry?*, was that the standards for American poetry were changing at *exactly* the moment that she surfaced in the public eye, and so it's really quite interesting because she became, I think, a popular favorite long before she became an academic favorite and, ironically and maybe oddly, that popularity helped preserve her until we could acquire the interpretive tools in academe and the openness to really see her for the genius that she is.

ER: Okay, yeah, great. Thank you. You know, I was also, this brought back to me, my second question that I had briefly gotten distracted from, which was: as you well know, working on such an extensive group of women writers who vanished, I wondered if you could talk to our listeners today a little bit about, at least in the broad brushstrokes, whether you think there's some general way to account for that. I often say to my students, you know, we do need to take every recovery case—in some ways, we need to go deep into the research and tell each story separately, because they're all going to be different somehow. But it's possible we can make some historical generalizations that are still accurate. So, for example, there are many scholars who have said in print that there was a widespread vanishing, disappearing of women writers early in the 20th century, and this ties back to what you were just saying about the changes you talk about in *Who Killed American Poetry?*. That there was a widespread vanishing of women writers and that only starts getting rectified basically around the 1970s, and then with increasing force in the 80s with the canon wars and the culture wars. I was wondering whether you are comfortable with that narrative. Do you feel that, in general, it's accurate? And do you have any other comments or particular cases from among the women writers you've talked about that might be good examples of why they vanished and why they came back?

KK: Well, it's such an interesting and complex question. I mean, obviously I can't give a very full answer in a short period of time. But I want to say that many of the women didn't vanish in the way that we think they did. Which is to say, they vanished in literary circles, in more elite circles, in academic circles. But they were very prominent in popular culture. They appeared in school readers. There's a book in—and I'm now referring, I wish I had a chance to give you the exact title—in my *Robert Frost and Feminine Literary Tradition* I reference a pedagogical book composed by a Yale professor, and I want to say it's in the 1920s. And *all* the women regionalists are there, a lot of the names that we have quote unquote "recovered" were being taught.

ER: Yeah, okay. Yeah, very important.

KK: And were visible. I also think that, you know, just among ordinary people. I mean, I look to my own family, you know. I grew up in the 50s. God, I'm old. [laughs] But I had great aunts and uncles who were born in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and they had anthologies, probably including [Edmund Clarence] Stedman's anthology, *An American Anthology*, published in 1900, that had a lot of the writers that we, you know, now think of rather highly today. So, and you know, also, I have to say, and I say this also in the Frost book, that the male writers were not at all averse to, well, I'll say, *borrow* from their female counterparts. Robert Frost's poem "Design," echoes a much earlier poem, but the poem was in Stedman's *American Anthology* called "The Mariposa Lily" by California poet laureate, Ina Coolbrith. You know, his "Birches" is, I think reprises in some ways—obviously I think it's a much better poem—Lucy Larcom's "Swinging on a Birch Tree," which I talk about in the book as well. Lucy Larcom was a student of Robert Frost's dear friend Susan Hayes Ward who edited *The Independent*, where he published his first poem. So these links are everywhere, if we look for them. They're not necessarily obvious and a lot of time I think the male writers didn't necessarily mention them.

ER: Yup.

KK: So I've kind of gotten off on a little cul-de-sac—

ER: No, no, that's very important and takes us to another topic I wanted to discuss with you today that also links the broader arena of scholarship that you work in with the specific case of Sarah Piatt, which is the whole phenomenon of so-called "children's poetry." So I want to sort of pose, I'll just pose a few questions about that and then just ask you if you might talk about it in a general sense. First of all, I'll mention again for our listeners that you and Angela Sorby have published an anthology of nineteenth-century American children's poetry called *Over the River and through the Wood* including the works of many poets, including Sarah Piatt. And one of the things that comes up frequently when I teach Piatt is, we always have our eye on where the poems were first published. So of course as Paula Bennett pointed out in her pioneering work, Piatt was publishing in a lot of different periodical venues, including newspapers, political newspapers, including elite literary magazines, but also publications for children, like the *Youth's Companion*. And sometimes you get a great sense of cognitive dissonance in the classroom when you look at the content of the poems that are being published in the vehicles for children and, you know, to one of our contemporary readers, you just think, oh my gosh, that's completely the wrong venue. But, could you talk a little bit to our listeners, Karen, about the culture of publishing poems for children during the years of Sarah's career? Like you know, what do we make of a woman poet who's publishing in all these different niches in the marketplace?

KK: Well, she was doing what so many 19th-century writers did, but *especially* American women, many of whom had to earn their living, like Lucy Larcom. Which is to say, they published wherever and whenever they could. Now, Sarah's a kind of an interesting and somewhat different case inasmuch as, unlike some of the poets who published children's poetry—and I need to go back at some point and say a little bit more about the trajectory of

children's poetry over the century, because it's not uniform as you might expect. But for Sarah, I think what makes her work so powerful for me and for Angela [Sorby] as well, and why we included 13 of her poems in our collection, is that she is a virtuoso cross-writer. That is to say, she can write poems that speak very differently to children and to adults. And "The Funeral of a Doll" is perhaps the best exemplar of that. Now, let me give you another example, because I've just been working with this as I work on *The Envious Lobster,* and that is William Cullen Bryant's "To a Fringed Gentian," which almost everyone credits with being first published in his—I think it's 1832 *Poems* if I'm getting it right, but was first published in *The Juvenile Miscellany* in 1828. So he and so many other writers were publishing in venues for children. Or like the Cary sisters who published a single-author, well, twin-author volume, if you will, oftentimes those poems that appeared originally in a children's venue would be published just as poems in a collected works. So there was no sort of hard and fast distinction between the two audiences in the same way that we make those distinctions. I think that was a later in the century phenomenon.

ER: Okay. Yes, now, you said you wanted to return to the trajectory of children's poetry over the century? Was that the point you wanted to make?

KK: That was the point, right, that I wanted to make. I also did want to say that Piatt is cross-writing not just for children and adults, but she's also cross-writing for popular and literary audiences—

ER: Yeah, yeah.

KK: —For male and female audiences. So it's much more complicated than just children / adult.

ER: Yes, now a few minutes ago you said—maybe this is a good time to go back to it— that you hoped we would be able to talk a little bit about "The Funeral of a Doll."

KK: Okay.

ER: Is this is this a place where you might want to pull into that poem and because, again, our listeners likely don't know this poem, and one of the things I'll say about our series more generally, is that, as I have the pleasure of talking to different people, when a particular poem comes up, sometimes I pull my volume down from the shelf and I open to the poem and it gives us a chance to at least read a few lines to people who are unfamiliar with the poem. Give them a sense of what's happening in some of these poems. And it's a great way to introduce listeners who are unfamiliar with these poems to the idea of how Sarah writes and why the poems are interesting. So I just yanked my copy of Paula Bernat Bennett's selected edition of Sarah's work called *Palace-Burner* which came out in 2001. And for any listeners who might want to grab a copy of this book, you'll also see that she follows each poem with the date of publication. In this case, "The Funeral of a Doll" was published in a Washington, DC newspaper called *The Capital* in 1872. And one of the reasons that's significant is that that was a political newspaper. And it's very, very rare now, it's hard to find, so let me mention also for interested listeners: we at Ohio State have digitized every issue of that newspaper during the years that Sarah was publishing in it and the years that it was being edited and managed by her cousin-by-marriage,

Donn Piatt, that's D-O-N-N, two n's—Donn Piatt, who was an extraordinarily famous writer and journalist during the Civil War and Reconstruction. He too has almost completely vanished from public memory, but he was a very important figure. So you can find *The Capital* on the web now, free to the public, digitized by Ohio State, and you can see Sarah's poems in it, and this would be one of them. So Karen, you said earlier that you hoped maybe we would talk a little bit about "The Funeral of a Doll." I've given people a sense of when the poem appeared. Want to talk about it a little bit and tell people some of the reasons it's of interest?

KK: Sure. Well, I think this poem is a tour de force. It's a tour de force of managing different voices. It speaks to the tradition of child death poems in the 19th century and transforms that tradition. We usually think of it as beginning with Lydia Sigourney but there were many others who wrote child death poems throughout the century. But this poem has multiple voices, and one really has to read it over and over and over again to hear those voices and hear the moments when the voices shift. One of my favorite features of the poem, oddly enough, because it's about a funeral—ostensibly of a doll but not *really* of a doll—is it's very funny and I think that Piatt does not get enough credit for her humor.

ER: I agree.

KK: Now, obviously it's very dark humor. But she's not the only amusing, well—amusing woman poet in the 19th century. I mean, one thinks of Lydia Sigourney's "To a Shred of Linen" or Phoebe Cary's "Samuel Brown," which parodies Annabel Lee [by Edgar Allan Poe], which is hysterically funny. But here, you know, we get a stanza that appears to be the first stanza, it appears to be a pretty straightforward account by an adult about a child having a funeral for her doll. And then we get to the second stanza, and the second stanza is—there's evidence of a shift in tone earlier, retrospectively, but you only get it retrospectively. So the speaker says:

Her funeral it was small and sad.
    Some birds sang bird-hymns in the air.
The humming-bee seemed hardly glad,
    Spite of the honey everywhere.
    The very sunshine seemed to wear
Some thought of death, caught in its gold,
That made it waver wan and cold.
Then, with what broken voice he had,
    The Preacher slowly murmured on
    (With many warnings to the bad)
The virtues of the Doll now gone.

Well, the parenthesis just, it's a flag, you know, to us to pay attention as readers to the fact that this is not a funeral of a doll. And that in some sense, while the narrator is—she's making fun of funerary traditions, and I think, actually, conventional grief because it's inadequate. But she alerts us to that. And my students love this poem, partly because I read it to them. And many of them at the end are weeping.

ER: Wow.

KK: And then we track the way that the voices work through the poem. And after I've finished reading it, we go back and I'll ask them, "Okay, where did you first sense that there was more going on than just this description of a funeral of a doll?" And, I mean, they ultimately end up all the way back in the first stanza, which you don't necessarily pay attention to when you see the title.

ER: Where do they go in the first stanza, is there is a particular moment they tend to cite? Or they just say you can already tell it there.

KK: No, I think, by really the middle of the first stanza: "never troubled any one" and then "her pretty life was done." It just seems too precious. And then the "waxen saint." They just feel that it's over the top. How can a doll be a waxen saint? There's got to be more to this poem and this mourning ritual than meets the eye. So this is a retrospective reading, and I think that happens so often with Piatt. You just have to read the poems over and over and over again. And you know, even then it's like with Dickinson. You feel as though every time you come to it, you see something new.

ER: Now, with your vast amount of scholarship in many, many, many women poets—you know, this is something unique you bring to all of us in your work—there are many scholars who have focused on several recovered writers, or one recovered writer, but you've worked with *so* many women's poetic voices: I'm curious, do you think that—you mentioned that Sarah can be extremely funny, and I agree. Funny in a very dark way. Would you say, more generally, do you think there are particular features of Sarah's poetic voice that mark her as unique or distinct in this larger arena of women poets in the 19th century?

KK: Wow, that's a really tough question.

ER: Yeah, it is.

KK: When I was putting together the *Nineteenth-Century America Women Writers* anthology—I'm going to answer this question quite indirectly.

ER: Okay.

KK: When I was putting together that anthology, and Paula [Bennett] had given me this huge sheaf of Sarah Piatt poems, I chose poems on several bases. I chose *her* selections on several bases. One, I tried to represent the full range of her career as we then knew it. Of course, you've done *so* much wonderful work and recovered *so* many more of her earlier poems. I tried to represent different Piatt voices. I tried to choose those that would appeal to students. And, very importantly, I tried to choose poems that could appear in conversation with other women poets: Frances [Ellen Watkins] Harper, Emily Dickinson, Lucy Larcom, and Alice Cary, Lydia Sigourney, Lizette Woodworth Reese, and even the early American sampler verses which were stitched onto fabric. I mean, there's one that that I love, I can quote it for you: "Adam alone in

Paradise did grieve. / And thought Eden a desert without Eve. / Until God, pitying of his lonesome state, / Crowned all his wishes with a loving mate. / What reason, then, hath man to slight or flout her, / That could not live in Paradise without her?" All right? So Piatt's right in that vein. All right, so I was looking for moments of connection, so Harper and Piatt's Civil War poetry, the humorous poetry, Sigourney and Piatt, and so on. But you did ask me what I found distinctive about her, and one of the things that I have struggled to try to understand, and I'm not there yet, but it's her descriptions of nature, because of course, you know, I'm very interested in environmental writing and nature writing. And her descriptions of nature, nature is *not* about nature in Piatt.

ER: Yeah, that's a really nice point.

KK: For many of the other poets, it is. I think of "Trumpet Flowers," for example, or "Giving Back the Flower." Nature is always something else. And there's this kind of—I don't want to say disembodiment. But there's a resistance to corporeality in her poems that I don't find in many of the other poets. Perhaps the person who comes closest is Frances Harper, for obvious reasons, because as a Black woman poet, with the history of enslaved people in the United States and the treatment, the horrific treatment of Black women, many Black women poets wanted to separate themselves from embodiment, quite reasonably and expectedly. So that's to me, nature in Piatt—because I actually wanted to include her in, you know, some of my environmental writing, and I haven't found a way to do it yet.

ER: Wow, that's super interesting. That's not something I had noticed before or conceived of but the minute you say it, it makes perfect sense. Like the minute you said that I was like, that is totally right. I mean, so interesting, I hadn't thought of it before and, you know, of course, just helping our listeners to understand the broader context, if they're new to poetry, you know, we're talking about a time period when nature poetry is kind of one of the standard kinds of poetry. You know, people know it, they like it, they love it, they read it, they recite it, they share it, I mean it's just—there's such a powerful Romantic tradition of writing about nature at the time. And as you're saying this, Karen, I'm thinking, you know—I'm going to continue to think about this after we finish talking, today, obviously. But, you know, I think of Sarah as a poet who writes a lot about places. You know, she writes poems about Ireland and she writes about this or that place I visited, about [President William Henry] Harrison's tomb [in North Bend, Ohio] near her house in Cleves, Ohio. And so she writes a lot about very precise locations, but now that you're saying this I'm realizing, but they're *not* nature poems. So that's really very interesting.

KK: I hope somebody will write about it and teach me about it.

ER: Okay, all right. Great. And you know, the other thing you were talking about that maybe we can swing back to—it relates to what you said about her being a darkly humorous poet and also the issue of the voices. You mentioned that "The Funeral of a Doll" is a poem in a complex kind of dramatic voice, and of course this is one of the things that, especially for new readers of poetry, you have to help them with in Sarah's poems, that you often don't know who's speaking. She doesn't identify the speaker. She might or might not give you quotation marks.

She often toggles among multiple voices, some of whom are in quotation marks and others of whom are not, and you have to figure out who the characters are, basically. So there's a lot going on with the complexity of voice in Sarah, as you know. But it's also an issue not only of a lot of character voices, but of, like, rhetorical mode. So you know, just to clarify for our listeners—and then I'd love to hear you talk about this a little bit—we could say well, she's got a humorous voice. Paula Bennett's argument about Sarah is that she was fundamentally an ironic poet. So, she has a voice for adults and a voice for children, and a lot of times these are all mixed into one poem. So, do you think that writing in that kind of array of voices is something you see among a lot of women poets? Do you think that the irony that Paula Bennett flagged, you know, this is Sarah's key mode? Do you think that is something that Sarah handles in a way that is not necessarily something we're finding more broadly across women's poetry of the time?

KK: All of the poets that I mentioned earlier have multiple voices, but none as many as Sarah, and none used with such frequency. I think many of the others tend to follow in, sort of, clusters of modes. So, for example, you might say that the Cary sisters wrote predominantly sentimental poetry, but they did also write some culturally dissenting poetry, such as Phoebe Cary's poem—the parodies—and also Alice Cary's—one of my favorite poems—"The Seaside Cave, " which is, it's Poe-esque, but it's also very much a critique of Poe and the men who romanticized women. I think other than Dickinson, no one has her range, and I think she was almost uniquely capable of calibrating that range for the audience that she was planning to reach.

ER: Now this takes us to another topic that you can really help us with, and of course here I'm posing the question having had the terrific experience of reading [Kilcup's 2019 book] *Who Killed American Poetry? From National Obsession to Elite Possession*. And for our listeners we'll focus for a minute on that subtitle: "*From National Obsession to Elite Possession*." And this is tied to what you were saying earlier about how understandings of poetry—what it's for, who reads it, and so on—are shifting by the end of the century. Can you talk a little bit, Karen, about how you feel that the culture of reviewing that you break down in such scholarly depth in this book, how did being reviewed affect Sarah's career or her reception? Can you talk a little bit about reception for Sarah? It's one of your unique areas, I think.

KK: Well, she was fortunate to be very widely reviewed, not just nationally, but internationally. I think that one of the key features of her reviewing history was the fact that William Dean Howells, who was at one point, of course, the powerful editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* and a proponent of literary realism, was a supporter. I mean, he was critical of her in some ways, he didn't *get* her. He was, as you well know, friends with Sarah's husband J.J. [John James Piatt] and they had published a book of poems together. But Howells, I think, kind of set the standard in some ways for Piatt's reputation. But it wasn't just Howells, I mean, it was the reviewing climate after the Civil War. The Civil War, as I talk about in *Who Killed American Poetry*, was a kind of hiatus period when a lot of the criteria that reviewers had been emphasizing earlier in the century were suspended for a period. I will say, going back to our discussion about nature and nature in Piatt, was that throughout the century nature as a theme, it was a prototypically American theme. Now how that was handled differed over the period, and how reviewers

understood it differed over the course of the century. But that was a very important theme. But also of course, the most important thing in regard to Sarah is emotion and the ways that she handled emotion. Sentimentalism before the Civil War and during it. Sentimentalism before the Civil War, very much approved in American poetry generally. Sentimentalism and emotion, there was manly emotion and womanly emotion. During the Civil War, of course a very emotional time, it was fine. After that period, people began to—the critics, that is to say—began to assign it almost exclusively to women. This despite the fact that—I think, gosh, I'm trying to remember the review I quote. I think it's 1820, in the early 1820s, the epic poem, *Yamoyden*, [by James Wallis Eastburn and Robert Charles Sands] where the critic is, he doesn't like the emotionalism in the poem. So there are the roots of this anti-emotion, anti-sentimentalism very early on, but it really comes to the fore, and the critique of sentimentalism and emotion, *excess* emotion, comes to the fore after the Civil War, and Piatt and Lucy Larcom are the two figures that I talk about at some length. Both were subjected to that as a criteria. Now, as you know from reading the book, there was a huge amount of disagreement. Some people felt that because she was expressing her emotion in relation to children and loss that it was acceptable. The trouble with that is that it consigned her to minor status. So, right? I mean, there was good and bad to that association. But more or less, the critics really didn't know what to do with her. Some said she was obscure, some said she wasn't. Some said she was overly emotional, some said there's no emotion in her poetry at all. But one of the key things that she was critiqued for was obscurity. Because in that era when—clarity had always been a virtue of American poetry, but in that era when realism was emerging really forcefully in American poetry, obscurity was not something that the critics could tolerate. And as one critic said, "That way, madness and Browningism lie." [laughs]

ER: Yes, now, okay. How about maybe this is an opportune time to talk about [Robert] Browning. And, you know, what's your sense of Browning's importance to Sarah?

KK: Well, I think he was very important to her. I mean, his dramatic poems clearly had a profound influence on her. It's very interesting, of course, that the Browning societies that were so popular in the United States were mostly peopled by women. But, yeah, I mean, I think that it was part of her developing mode, although I think the seeds of it were there early on.

ER: Yes, certainly. You know we mentioned earlier her earliest poems, when she's not yet Sarah Piatt, but she's Sallie M. Bryan, publishing in the top newspapers of the age, those poems [the full array of her work as Sallie M. Bryan in total] are full of dramatic poems.

KK: Yes.

ER: I'd like to focus on this for our listeners because, as you also know, and you work a lot with poetry in the classroom, there's often a default assumption among our contemporaries today that poems are always essentially lyric poems—by which I mean just for our audiences' greater understanding if they're unfamiliar with poetry—basically, a poem that's always someone talking about their own personal emotions or subjectivity. Just like a pure record of how *I* feel. And in the nineteenth century when poetry was so popular and so much a part of everyday life, you know, people were very flexible about recognizing poems of all different

kinds, and they didn't have that default assumption. And of course, we're talking about an age when, you know, Shakespeare is one of the most popular writers in America, going to see Shakespeare is very popular. It's not elite, it's not highbrow. So the idea that you would deal with reading poems that are essentially character voices and think of that as something to really enjoy is maybe something our culture today doesn't connect with as much, and Sarah certainly was writing in that mode. I had a graduate student, a few years ago—I'll just mention quickly, Karen—who did a paper tracking how Sarah and J.J. were discussed frequently in the press as, the phrase was "wedded poets," akin to the Brownings. And so, you know, we ended up having that other connection with, of course, his much more famous wife at the time, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Robert Browning with the Piatts. I'm sorry, Karen, I think I interrupted you.

KK: No, no, no, no. Well and, of course the critique of Browning, that he was obscure. The same critique that Sarah got.

ER: Yes, yeah.

KK: What I was going to say is that, you know, we can go back to one of my favorite poems, "Giving Back the Flower," which is *profoundly* dramatic and stunningly modern.

ER: Now you know, I was going to ask you, I think in fact after today, now our conversation has inspired me—I think I'm going to wrap up every one of these interviews asking people if they can tell us the titles of a few of their favorite poems by Sarah. And as you well know, because you've also done a lot of work with Paula Bennett, this was the first poem of Sarah's she [Bennett] encountered. It's a big part of her origin story. So it's very interesting that that's one of your favorites. Can you tell us a little bit about why it strikes you, and maybe we can get people reading it.

KK: Well, the poem, which is a Civil War-era poem, a beloved presumably speaking to her dead beloved long after is—it's set in very long lines.

ER: And that's unusual for her, right? Her lines aren't usually that long.

KK: Well, it's unusual for almost every poet in the 19th century. And it's very conversational, it's very intimate, it's very private. It's also very angry. And anger is still an emotion forbidden to women, but *certainly* in the nineteenth century it was not an emotion that women were expected to or even able to express. And so I think that's one of the reasons that this poem seems so compelling to me.

ER: Yeah, that's a great point about Sarah's angry voice. And you're getting me thinking about other places where we might talk about that as well. Definitely you hear it in some of the relatively small number of letters that we have today actually written by Sarah, and you can hear that voice coming out sometimes, and she's not going to apologize for it. This was also interestingly one of the poems, as you know, chosen by John Hollander when he did his Library of America edition of nineteenth-century American poetry [*American Poetry: The Nineteenth*

Century], and he chose this one. So, you know, sometimes when I talk, especially with first-wave scholars like yourself—and maybe we can talk about this for a few minutes now before we run out of time—is where you think we are in the recovery and where you think it might need to go. I sometimes like to talk to people about what they think at the present time have become the signature poems by Piatt. We know that it will evolve over time, but where we are with that now, and given that you pick this one, Hollander picked it, Paula picked it, I'm thinking this might be one of those poems.

KK: I think definitely. "The Funeral of a Doll," I think it should be one of her signature poems. It's funny because as I was preparing for our conversation, I also decided I wanted to look back at Sarah's surfacing in anthologies generally. And I don't unfortunately have access to the table of contents of recent, I think, the seventh edition of the Heath [*The Heath Anthology of American Literature*]. And I don't know what edition the Norton [*The Norton Anthology of American Literature*] is at. But I thought it would be very interesting to see what poems those anthologies were presenting. I think "[The] Palace-Burner," of course, is going to be on everyone's list. I was looking at the William Spengemann anthology [*Nineteenth-Century American Poetry*] that Jess Roberts did with him and "[The] Palace-Burner" is the first poem in that collection. But I don't think—maybe "Army of Occupation," I would have chosen, but I'm not sure I would have chosen any of the others as *my* favorites, anyway.

ER: I think "The Fancy Ball" is on a lot of lists right now.

KK: Yes, yeah. Yes, it's in mine. I think one of her last poems—well, there's just so many: "Inspiration and Poem" ["The Descent of the Butterfly (Inspiration and Poem)"], "A Mistake in the Bird-Market," "A New Thanksgiving," which, may have been her last published poem. That or "Daffodils" ["A Daffodil," 1911] I forget which one. But I mean, "A New Thanksgiving" is a hair-raising poem—speaking of her [laughs] "dark and angry voice"! As far as where we are in her recovery, I'm disturbed and worried. I mean, I think there are great possibilities. I think the work that you are doing is *absolutely* crucial. The reason I say that I'm a little concerned is I went to the *MLA Online Bibliography*, and they aren't updated through the present—they only cover 2001 to 2018 for Sarah—but in that list there were only 19 entries, two of which were dissertations, one of which was Paula's *Palace-Burner*. And one of which was Elaine Showalter's anthology *The Vintage Book of American Women Writers*. Now, none of the four articles that we did for *ESQ* in honor of Paula have yet shown up. [Karen Kilcup is the editor of *ESQ: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture*, which published a special issue in honor of Bennett in 2018.] Who *Killed American Poetry?* hasn't shown up. But still, we're only—even if we add those—we're only at 24. So there's work to be done, and so I guess we need to say that there are challenges and opportunities. And one thing that I'm always encouraging people to do, because I think it's a very productive strategy in getting people back in the canon, is what I did in *Soft Canons* [*Soft Canons: American Women Writers and Masculine Tradition*, 1999] which was the collection I did—I don't remember the date, sometime in the early 2000s—where I asked contributors to pair a woman writer who needed to be recovered with a canonical or well-known male writer. Because to get that kind of legibility, we almost have to invite our colleagues and our students to read, and they won't read if it's just an article on Piatt. They're much more likely to read if it's an article on Piatt and Dickinson, for example,

or Piatt and Whitman, which to my knowledge, nobody has done yet. But I think as a strategy that's something that we need to do. We need to, to the degree that we're able to, influence anthologists to try to ensure that she continues to be in anthologies. I hope to include or expect to include some of her work in *The Envious Lobster*, which will enable *teachers* to access her, and if we can—

ER: I wanted to ask you about that, if she'd be included there.

KK: So if we can get teachers at various levels to include her in their syllabi, I think that will move things forward a great deal, especially if students acquire an early taste, so to speak.

ER: Yes, well you know one of the questions I sometimes get, this came up in a podcast that my rare books curator, Jolie Braun, and I did with the women writers podcast, *Bonnets at Dawn,* and the host said to us, did we feel that one of the more unique obstacles confronting Piatt's recovery is simply that we're working in the domain of poetry, as opposed to fiction.

KK: I think that's definitely true. I mean, students are still poem averse. Yes, those of us who teach poetry, and you know I teach in a minority-serving institution with huge numbers of first-generation university students. And so, many of them have not really encountered much poetry, much academic poetry in their earlier careers. And so, it can be an uphill climb. On the other hand, there are ways to do it. I taught my "Literature and the Environment" class last fall, and one of the assignments was—let me back up a bit. The emphasis for the course was environmental racism and environmental justice, and one of the main texts for the course was a wonderful anthology edited by Camille Dungy called *Black Nature*, which is multiple centuries of Black poets writing about nature. And every day one student had to choose a poem to read and talk about and explain his or her connection to that poem, and I think that *really* helped them a great deal.

ER: That's a great assignment, I think I'm going to borrow that. I like that assignment. Very good, yeah. Well, Karen, we just have a couple more minutes, and then we need to wrap up. I wonder if there are any other thoughts about Sarah or her recovery that you might like to close with before we sign off.

KK: Oh my…

ER: A very, very general question, but thought I'd just see if we didn't get to something that you had hoped we might talk about.

KK: Well, as you know, I could talk about Piatt—[laughs]

ER: You and I are both in that club. I have to be shut down myself or I will just keep going.

KK: Exactly. Well, I would still like to see Piatt placed in the company, not just of canonical male poets, but also her contemporaries in fuller detail than Paula [Bennett] was able to do in her groundbreaking book. One really, I think, helpful approach might be to look at the way that

Piatt forecasts the poets who come after her. And now I'm thinking about one of my favorites, Lizette Woodworth Reese, who I think is incredibly undervalued. So those kinds of studies. But you know, we just generally need more scholarship on her, more teaching of her, more ways to get her voice out, more ways to help people understand the complexity, the virtuosity of her work. And last but not least, we need your biography.

ER: [laughs] Oh, the biography is so much fun. I love working on it, and there's so much to discover as you know. One of the challenges with dealing with a figure like this, about whom there is no biography other than the sketches published in her own time and then the very, very helpful biographical sketches that first-wave scholars like yourself included in their anthologies, is, you know, going out there and finding more records. We only have so much to work with. And so, it's fascinating and it continues to remind me—and this goes back to me saying to you, you know—it sounds like you sense the same thing—we have something of an obstacle in our current culture with a resistance to poetry. But as Paula [Bennett] pointed out from the very beginning, Sarah is so tied to so many major cultural cataclysms, that talking about her through that lens I think is very appealing to our contemporaries and teaching them some poems along the way. I think this can be a real contribution to our public culture right now.

KK: Well, she is a unique, powerful voice, who really deserves much broader attention. You know, we're trying to make it happen.

ER: Well, thank you again, Karen. Thank you for talking with us today. Thank you for being there to bring Sarah back to attention in the first wave of scholarship and I look forward to seeing where you go with your forthcoming work. And thank you for talking to us today.